

On the other hand, not only will the Mac version of Encore not open previous Windows projects, it won't open projects produced by the Windows version of Encore CS3. Encore CS3 Windows will open previous Encore projects, but not projects produced by the Mac version.

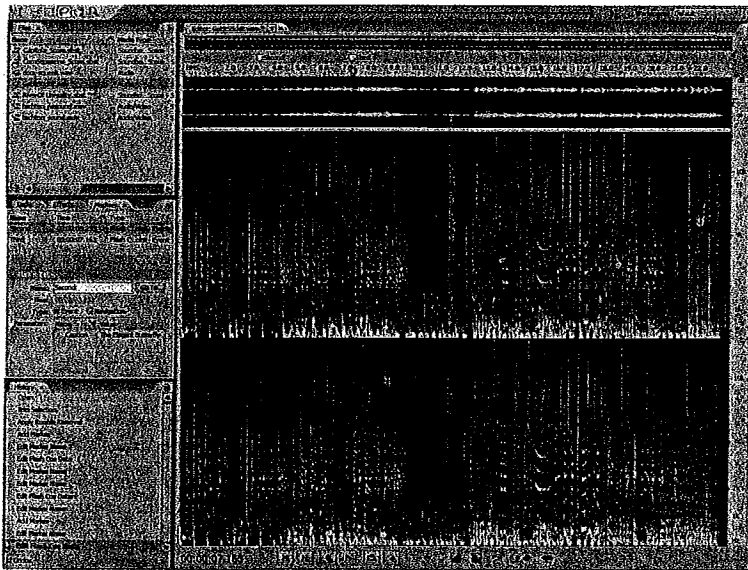
What's the net? Windows users get Encore in the box, with Blu-ray and Flash output, along

with OnLocation and its lovely waveform monitors. These alone are worth the price of the upgrade. Vista haters like me get an alternative production platform, while those already on the Mac get an affordable, easy-to-use option to Final Cut Pro and DVD Studio Pro—and a great Blu-ray option. While there are some rough edges, it's still a great deal all around. □

Adobe Soundbooth CS3

Pared down from Audition, audio app is still a powerhouse for video pros.

REVIEWER: GARY ESKOW



If you've worked with other Adobe products, the Soundbooth interface will appear familiar to you.

Adobe's new Creative Suite 3 program Soundbooth is intended to give video producers a variety of sophisticated sound-editing tools, accessed from a simple-to-understand user interface. The program replaces a more extensive audio application, Audition, in the CS3 Production Premium suites. In making that switch, Adobe's idea was to give video guys, rather than audio pros, tools that they could dive

in and use right away. Performing surgery on blemished audio tracks, adding a musical score, and recording new material—functions once reserved for the experienced audio engineer—can be overwhelming. How does the functionality of Soundbooth compare with audio software designed for the experienced engineer? More importantly, are you—the video producer who's looking to expand your skill set and save money by working on audio as well as video—likely to find this product inviting or intimidating?

I feel inclined to offer an opinion immediately: I think Soundbooth is a terrific product. As you'll see when we get into a few detailed examples, its sound-sculpting does not meet the standard set by the premium products on the market (unsurprisingly so). However, Soundbooth offers so much, and makes it so easy for the non-technical audio engineer to record and clean up audio clips, that it deserves high marks.

For starters, if you've worked with other Adobe products, Soundbooth (available in Mac and Windows flavors) will appear familiar as soon as you open it up. A series of dockable panes allow you to customize the workspace and save templates that will optimize your workflow. If you're installing the required audio hardware for the first time, you might spend some time establishing the proper connections; otherwise the process is straightforward.

As I mentioned, Soundbooth has a score-composition component, and you can record audio—voiceovers, for example—inside it as well. But let's start out by addressing a common problem. You return to your studio from a shoot and notice that your principal interview went well. However, there are some problems: The overall level is too low, and you'd like to get rid of some intermittent audio intrusions.

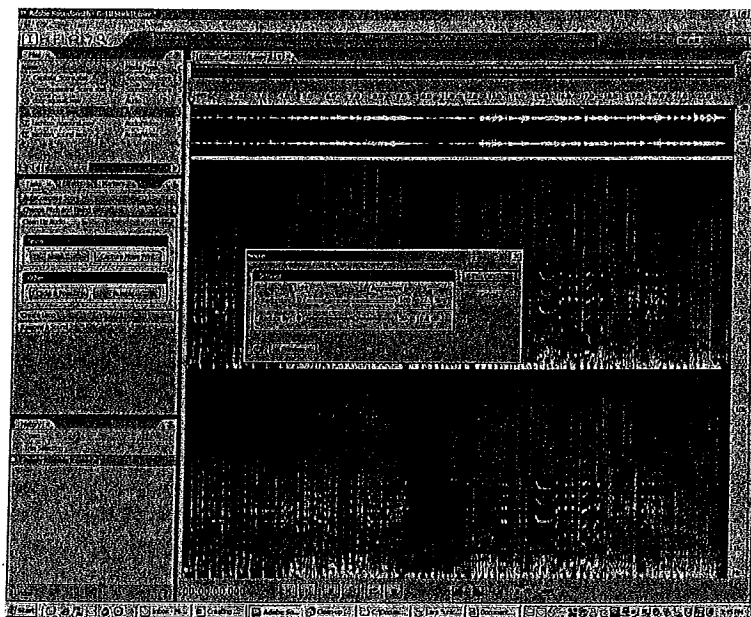
With no hard manual (one can be purchased separately), Soundbooth users will rely on the Help component. Stay online while you're studying, because the video tutorials that the Help file links to are excellent. They offer a tutorial that shows you how to remove unwanted sounds, using a cell phone ring as an example. I asked Adobe to send me the same audio clip they used

so that I could remove these three rings from the clip using Soundbooth, and then replicate the task using Steinberg Media Technologies' WaveLab 6.

Both applications use spectral analysis to weed out the undesirable audio from the good stuff. Although the multicolored pane may seem confusing, the concept is simple when you invoke a spectral analyzer. When they are represented by different colors, audio bands are easy to distinguish. Thus, three cell phone rings are a cinch to spot. Once you have them in view, all you have to do is grab a Hand tool, draw a box around them, and tell the application to zap them. Easy. Soundbooth and WaveLab 6 handle the assignment in nearly identical fashions. However, WaveLab 6 offers an outstanding set of filters—I chose a low-band pass filter that minimized the effect on the male interview subject—and its algorithms are superb. Comparing the post-surgery files, it was easy to hear that Soundbooth, which successfully removed the cell phone rings, slightly altered the upper frequencies of the male interview subject's voice.

But let's keep things in perspective. The damage was very slight; for almost every audio post application, zero percent of the listening public would notice the difference. The verdict? Matched against one of the premier audio applications, Soundbooth came in a respectable second. Ditto goes for the comparison between Soundbooth's normalization functionality and that offered by the Waves L1 Ultramaximizer, for example. The normalization within Soundbooth retains a relative balance between soft and loud data while bringing everything closer to 0dB, the optimal level.

OK, let's stay on this theme of matching Soundbooth—a veritable Swiss Army knife of audio tools—against a premium audio product. Do you know what convolution reverb is? The rage in audio sweetening, the convolution reverb process begins when a sine wave or starter pistol is recorded in a space such as the Grand Canyon, to use a dramatic example. Back in the lab, the sound of the "impulse" is removed, leaving nothing but the reverberant space itself, which may then be applied to your wife's a cappella version of Barbara Streisand's "The Way We Were," or any other audio event. When this technology first became available about a decade ago, the hardware devices that housed it cost about \$12,000. Today, a number of software applications, including some freeware programs, offer excellent convolution reverb presets. Audio Ease's Altiverb—the consensus favorite—is remarkable.



Adobe Soundbooth CS3 uses spectral analysis to weed out the undesirable audio from the good stuff.

As you have already guessed, Soundbooth offers its own convolution corner. How does it stack up against Altiverb 6? Not great. But if you want to place your speaker in a stadium, that preset is good, and so are several others. In other words, you'll benefit from Soundbooth's convolution reverb, even though it isn't the best on the market.

I could go on, but you get the point. Have you worked with equalizers? If not, start out by choosing the descriptive presets that come with Soundbooth's EQ package and its other filters. As you become more experienced, open up the Advanced dropdown menus and begin experimenting with the reverb, chorus, pitch change, and flange settings. Soon you'll be stumbling on parameter combinations that sound good and saving them for future use. Bam! You're an audio engineer.

Score composition—or score generation is a more accurate term—is one of the hot areas in the audio (and video) post industry these days. As direct competitors to stock music, scoring tools work with pieces of music that have been embedded with data that allows for manipulation of the track. You can adjust the length of individual sections and in most cases automate parameters. Besides automating volume adjustments, you can tell the software that you want to start out with a simple arrangement, for example, and have it build over time or dramatically increase in intensity at a specific SMPTE location. In the May issue of *Digital Content Producer*, I compared three of these programs: SmartSound Sonicfire Pro, Abaltat Muse, and Synk Audio MusicBed DV. (See digitalcontentproducer.com/soundforpic/revfeat/compose_own.)

bottomline

Company: Adobe

www.adobe.com

Product: Soundbooth CS3

Assets: High-quality musical selections, non-technical audio recording and editing.

Caveats: Can't import WAV files.

Demographic: Video pros wanting to expand their skillset in audio work.

PRICE: \$199

As you've guessed, Soundbooth has a feature for score composition. It's very promising. The effectiveness of a composition program depends on several things, and the number of base compositions available is one of the most vital. The musical selections for Soundbooth are well-recorded and, in general, of high musical quality. The range of styles is fairly wide, and previewing them inside Adobe's Bridge asset management module is a breeze. But the number of cuts needs to increase dramatically if Soundbooth is ever to compete with a premier product such as Sonicfire Pro. As an initial offering, however, this feature is excellent. The new music is well-written (the Wedding folder features chestnuts from

the literature, such as Johann Sebastian Bach's "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring"). Keyframes make it simple to customize the tracks to meet the specific needs of your video, and you can easily output the scores so that they can be imported by other applications. You cannot, however, import WAV files into Soundbooth, which is a limitation. Similarly, you can't create effect racks and use other effects that you may have in your computer.

Soundbooth is a self-contained system meant to interface easily with other Adobe applications. As we've seen, its individual components do not match the standard set by the crème de la crème audio applications. Focusing on these comparisons is a mistake, however. Affordable, easy to use, and of high quality, Soundbooth is an extremely attractive professional audio-for-video application. □

Grass Valley ProCoder 3

Speedy software encoder produces great quality. REVIEWER: JAN OZER



Figure 1: You can add bitmap images to video using Grass Valley ProCoder 3, such as the *Digital Content Producer* logo on the bottom right. Note the small letterboxes: a problem, or just a slightly sloppy interface?

With input/output support for the Grass Valley Canopus HQ and DV codecs, plus the ability to function as an export plug-in for Grass Valley's Edius Pro version 4, ProCoder 3 (\$499) should be strongly considered by any Edius users who require batch transcoding capabilities. With plug-in support for Adobe Premiere Pro 2.x and beyond, as a standalone product, ProCoder also makes a strong case for a more general audience; although, as with all transcoding products, there are strong and weak points.

Strengths include excellent encoding speed for most formats, a strong ability to leverage multi-core processors, plus good quality for every format tested—once I produced the desired data rate. Automation features are also excellent. There's support for Watch Folders and Droplets. Weaknesses include slow Flash encoding, some usability issues with H.264, a preview feature that needs tightening, and generally weak HD presets.

Grass Valley installs four programs upon installation: ProCoder itself, where you create encoding presets and batch-encoding runs; the Job Queue Manager, where you manage your encodings; the Watch Folder setup application, where you perform its namesake function; and the ProCoder Wizard, which can set up encoding runs and help with your Watch Folder selection. Overall, the programs are so simple to use and the wizard so limited that I recommend ignoring the wizard